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The Status of Computing and History Teaching in Austria

*Franz Eder and Eduard Fuchs**

The use and development of software for teaching history at schools and universities does not have a long tradition in Austria. In fact, our effort at the Institute of Economic and Social History at the University of Vienna in cooperation with other Austrian universities has been the first attempt to develop software for school teaching purposes. There have been a few projects in regard to CALL in some schools, mainly using British software on BBC-computers. According to this situation our contribution will give a general survey of the discussion of CAI in Austrian schools on the one, and will outline the situation and trend of CAI in university teaching. The main part of this paper is dealing with the concept and contents of the Austrian software-package »HIST«.

As to the first topic we have to look at the beginnings. When the Austrian Ministry for Education proposed to establish a so-called branch »Informatik« as a special subject of school-teaching some years ago, this proposal had not been the result of intensive discussion. Moreover other politicians wanted an accentuation of computers and new information-technologies as an underlying principle of general school education. Today »Informatik« is established as a particular branch starting with the fifth form of secondary school going over three years.

The disadvantages of the actual situation are obvious according to the experience of the last years:

- We have an own branch for »Informatik«, but **no university education** for teachers (most of them are teaching mathematics and made their certificate in short post-graduate courses).
- There were neither discussions **on the pedagogical** or didactic aspects and implications of CAI (mainly in relation to other methods) nor reflections about its interdisciplinary use and consequences for curricula and syllabuses.
- Most of the branches (including history) did **not develop their own** concepts for a specific use of information-technologies and computers in school-teaching.

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In university teaching, our efforts for the integration of CAI in Economic and Social History date from the early eighties. After first attempts in mastering the new medium we began to establish lectures in using the computer as a means for quantitative historical research. The aim of the beginners' course is to discuss problems of quantitative historical research, to create small databases using census lists, to prepare them for processing with statistical packages and to enable students to use basic options like data selection and recode, frequencies, cross tables, histograms etc. The advanced lecture teaches the usage of statistical procedures, the aggregation of new variables and matching of files. Our main interest is to show all phases of a quantitative research project and to give a practical instruction for students.

In addition to these courses, we offer lectures for the use of databases (at the moment for contemporary history) and the implications of CAI on the methodological and didactic aims of history teaching in schools. The last one should give an overview of the possibilities of information technologies in the classroom - from using computers as a simple knowledge-base up to simulations and simple statistical programs.

Because of lack of adequate software for these purposes we developed the first Austrian teaching program during the last year. »HIST« is a package including disks with a data-file of about 400 people from a workers' housing estate from the late nineteenth century, a special data retrieval and statistical program and some booklets for teachers and pupils/students, containing historical background information, technical instructions and didactic proposals. As a pilot project its primary aim is to get experiences about the possibilities and effects of CAI with quantitative methods in history teaching (especially in secondary schools).

The original source for our sample is a census list from 1890, giving several data about the workers' families of a big metal factory near Vienna: There are data about the number of persons of the household, the size of the flats and a wide range of information about each individual: name, position in household, place and date of birth, citizenship, confession, marital status, native language, profession and occupation, ability to read or write etc.

The basic concept of »HIST« is that pupils and students (in university lectures) should use these historical data for their own independent operations, to build up a catalogue of questions and theories about the social structure of a specific group among the working-class, to develop strategies to evaluate their theses and, last but not least, to integrate the results of their work into the general field of social history. Therefore, the computer and the »HIST«-software is only a tool in a wide range of historical methods; it offers the possibility of quick data retrieval and quantitative operations, but it does not »speak« without asking adequate questions.

For this means, our teaching package also contains different »qualitative« sources like a contemporary investigation about the working conditions in the factory, pictures of the flats and houses, lists of wages, political pamphlets etc. A booklet gives detailed information about the social and economic conditions of the working-class at the end of the nineteenth century. »HIST« should lead pupils to a project- and problem-orientated work in the history classroom and should give them the possibility to work as »real« historians. Therefore, there is a clear distinction to an ordinary simulation or adventure software, which automatically presents structures and »stories« on screen.

The use of »HIST« will change the normal classroom-situation: By means of this, teachers of history do no longer teach data-facts exclusively, but they are also the leaders and instructors of project-orientated work-groups, and they have to organise a historical research project. At the very moment we have no practical experiences concerning the use of our package at Austrian schools, and certainly there will arise a lot of problems as a result of bad equipment and administrative red tape. But the first reactions of teachers show that this kind of new history teaching is a good perspective for the future.

Considering this development Austrian historians intend to create a further national project for open CAI-concepts in history teaching. We want to create a comprehensive datasystem-, data retrieval- and statistic-software for different teaching aims. Besides, we will offer a pool of historical data bases - from the middle ages up to the present - which are the products of historical research of the last fifteen years. The cooperation of teachers, students and historians should also bring new concepts and methods not only for CAI but also for a new kind of history-teaching in schools and historical work at universities.